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ABSTRACT

Offered are guidelines to the development of theatre for, by, and about deaf persons. Various terms used for sign-language theatre and deaf theatre are defined and discussed in an introductory section, and the use of sign language as a theatrical medium is explained. The production of theatre is covered by sections on the history of deaf theatre, selection of material to be produced (including consideration of audience, capabilities of the theatre group, and merit of the material), use of narrators, and technical devices (including settings, blocking, costumes and props, lighting, and sound effects). (IM)

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California State University, Northridge

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Number 2.

Sign-Language Theatre and Deaf Theatre: New Definitions and Directions

by
Dorothy S. Miles and Louie J. Fant, Jr.

Harry J. Murphy
Editor

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FOREWORD

As the twenty-first century approaches, one observes that that "fabulous invalid"--the theatre--has found numerous avenues for participation in our society. Pandora's box has been opened, and there seems to be no end to the forms that theatre can take or the subjects possible for treatment. Some of these new and exciting theatre forms have flourished momentarily before our eyes and then faded and will be but a memory at the end of this century, while others have permanently established themselves as part of the total art of theatre. One of the innovations which seems to have a future is the theatre for nonhearing audiences. There appears to be a great audience to support this kind of theatre, and teachers and artists active in the world of the deaf are enthusiastically taking every opportunity to produce plays to meet this demand. Unfortunately, those who would open this new world to the deaf mistake long ticket lines and bountiful applause for art and an artistic contribution to the life of the audience.

The deaf world is clamoring for the theatre. It is an experience previously denied--something that fills a great need in their lives--and like the thirst-driven man in the desert, water of any quality is acceptable. It is imperative that those people who would work for a full life for the deaf and those people who consider themselves artists in the theatre stop and examine the quality of the product being offered to those who previously have had no standards for evaluation. Theatre for deaf people, because it is new and undeveloped, will be rough and unpolished for years. This is to be expected, but those involved in creating theatre for the deaf must accept the responsibility to make honest

evaluations of their work, to eliminate mistakes, and to insure that each new production is one step closer to the development of a theatre that both meets its obligation to its audience and is truly a work of art.

One dislikes the role of critic or pessimist, but those in the theatre of the deaf must resist intoxication by the titilative applause which comes presently from audiences starving for experiences previously denied. I am grateful to Dot Miles and Lou Fant for the work which follows--a work which offers guidelines to the development of full, rich theatre for and of the deaf. It is a statement reflecting their love for the people of the nonhearing world and their love for the art of the theatre.

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SIGN-LANGUAGE THEATRE AND DEAF THEATRE:
NEW DEFINITIONS AND DIRECTIONS

PROLOGUE

You walk into the theatre, find your seat, settle into it, and open your program. Tonight the performance is *Hamlet*, and you have heard that the leading actor is very good. You feel the theatregoer's thrill of anticipation when the lights dim and the curtain rises on the castle at Elsinore.

A familiar scene: battlements in the half-light, perhaps a glowing brazier, a guard pacing the walls. Now another figure appears in the gloom. You wait for the familiar words "Who's there?" and here they come. But what's this? The actor playing Bernardo has merely waved his arms and the voice that speaks his line comes not from him but from some other person. Francisco replies, "Nay, answer me. Stand and unfold yourself." He too makes symbolic gestures, and is accompanied by a different voice (or could it be the same voice, skillfully modified?).

Are these actors deaf? You cannot tell, and you are never told. Perhaps the actress playing Gertrude has normal hearing, but she too uses sign language and has a reader (or narrator) to speak her lines. Maybe at first you feel uncomfortable, but before long you have accepted the convention that all the actors use this visual medium, and soon you are fascinated by the added dimension it lends to the production.

You are attending a performance of *Hamlet* in *sign-language theatre* style.

The following week you return to the same theatre, take your seat again, and open your program. This time the title may be unfamiliar. Let's say it is *A Play of Our Own.*[1] The lights dim. The curtain rises. The scene is a modern living room. Apparently this is to be a realistic play.

You hear a telephone ringing, and at the same time a light flashes on and off. A woman enters and picks up the telephone receiver, places it on some kind of box, sits down, and begins to type. Some moments later she replaces the receiver and gets up. Now a man enters in pajamas and bathrobe. An animated sign-language conversation begins between the two. But where are the voices to narrate the lines? There are none.

Are these actors deaf? It would seem so. And when, later in the play, an actor enters who both signs and speaks for himself, you know that he has normal hearing and is portraying a character with normal hearing, while the other characters are deaf. The sign language they use may not be as majestic and poetic as you remember from *Hamlet*, but the play itself gives you an insight into the lives and thoughts of deaf persons.

You are attending a play produced in *deaf theatre* style.

What are the similarities and differences between the two styles, and how do they differ from conventional, spoken theatre, other than

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[1]Dorothy S. Miles, *A Play of Our Own*, unpublished manuscript, Copyright, 1973.

by their use of sign language? Why have these forms of theatre only recently achieved public recognition? What are the elements and techniques that make for acceptable *sign-language theatre*, and what themes and techniques are being explored in the evolution of a mode that can rightfully be called *deaf theatre*? These are among the questions that this paper seeks to answer.

PROGRAM NOTES

In many professional theatres, the entering theatregoer receives a thick booklet that tells him what he needs to know about the production he has come to see. The "program notes" offered here are similarly aimed at providing background material for the interested theatregoer and for those who are involved in any way with productions in sign language.

DEFINITIONS

At the present time, the terms *theatre of the deaf*, *deaf drama*, *deaf theatre*, *sign-language theatre*, and *silent theatre* appear to be used interchangeably. This is confusing for everyone concerned. The hearing public may be misled to believe that the productions are for deaf persons only (there is confusion between the phrases "*of* the deaf" and "*for* the deaf"). On the other hand, many sign-language productions turn out to be *more* appealing to hearing than to deaf audiences, and deaf persons feel cheated and deprived. Some of this confusion and ill-feeling could be avoided by a simplification and standardization of terms, which would not only inform the public of what to expect, but would clarify the objectives of each production for the director and actors involved, and thus serve to improve the level of work offered. The authors have selected the terms *sign-language theatre* and *deaf theatre* with these goals in mind.

The term *sign-language theatre* is used here to describe any production which begins with a text originally written for spoken theatre (such as *Hamlet*, *Death of a Salesman*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, and so on),

or with selected items of literature (poetry or prose), and arranges this work for simultaneous presentation in spoken language and in the sign language used by deaf persons in that country or locality. In the United States, the sign systems include American Sign Language (known by the acronyms Ameslan or ASL), Manual English and Signed English (which use Ameslan signs in English word order), and a number of offshoots aimed at a precise visual representation of English parts of speech. (These systems, and their influence on the styles of *deaf* and *sign-language theatre*, are discussed in detail on pages 8 to 17.)

The objectives of *sign-language theatre* are simply this: to present "hearing" theatre in a visual form (as when a deaf company performs *Hamlet*) and/or to enhance the theatre experience by using a medium inherently rich in visually dramatic components. At a professional level the sign language itself may be seen as an art form equivalent to ballet or the opera. *Sign-language theatre* does not deal with deafness *per se;* that is, it does not use material specifically related to the deafness of its actors. It does not require that its actors be deaf; in fact, it can be, and sometimes is, performed by an all-hearing cast. Plays can be stylized (conforming to a traditional style, such as Greek drama, Restoration comedy, or commedia dell'arte) or naturalistic (suggesting real life, but containing elements of fantasy or absurdity), but cannot be termed realistic (true-to-life representation), since they require the audience to accept the convention that every character is able to use sign language, regardless of his origin or occupation.

The term *deaf theatre* has been selected to describe the type of production that contains some or all of the following elements:

1. Material taken from a) existing texts for conventional theatre, adapted in such a way as to allow for a realistic portrayal of the deaf experience, or b) texts developed directly from the lives and experience of deaf persons, living or dead, and presented either realistically or as fantasy.
2. Onstage acknowledgement of the actor's deafness or normal hearing as a trait of the character he is portraying.
3. A logical explanation for the presence of narrators and for the use of sign language by hearing characters, where applicable.

These elements, and others that are desirable but not mandatory, are described in more detail in the appropriate sections of this paper.

The objectives of *deaf theatre* are: to entertain and enlighten both deaf and hearing audiences with realistic portrayals of the lives of deaf persons, or with real or imaginary representations drawn from the deaf person's unique perception of the world; to provide both deaf and hearing playwrights with models from which to develop further creations; and to bring to the deaf public a theatre with which they can truly identify. *Deaf theatre* thus uses sign language as a means of communication first, and as an art form second. Its aim is to be fully comprehensible without dependence on the spoken word, and where one or the other must be sacrificed for the sake of artistry, it is speech that is abandoned before sign language.

Deaf theatre and *sign-language theatre* are not mutually exclusive styles. They contain many elements in common, particularly in the technical area, and there is a certain amount of borrowing between them. It must be emphasized here that the difference is not one of merit or quality, but of scope and approach. There is room and demand for both styles: the common goal should be clarity of objectives and an overall upgrading of the production offered.

A number of other definitions are necessary.

Translation. In translating from one language to another, the translator is concerned primarily with meanings and not with a literal word-for-word substitution. Translation here refers to the process of preparing an English text for presentation in sign language (particularly in Ameslan) not by matching words to signs, but by choosing the best signs or sign phrases to relay the meanings of the English words and phrases.

Transliteration. This term normally refers to the process of substituting symbols or letters of one alphabet for those of another alphabet. For example, the Greek letters ΦΒΚ (*phi beta kappa*), can be transliterated as FBK in our alphabet. Of primary importance is the fact that one does not move from one language to another, but remains in the same language, merely substituting a different set of symbols for the usual ones; in other words, the letters are still spoken as *phi beta kappa*, not *eff bee kay*. The transliteration of English texts into signed texts concerns itself with matching signs to words. That is, one does not move from English to Ameslan, but from written/spoken English to signed English. English words are represented by signs or fingerspelling arranged in English word order. In short, when one moves from

English to Ameslan, one is translating; when one moves from spoken English to signed English, one is transliterating. Often there is a combining of the two processes, which results in a mixture that Bernard Bragg has called Ameslish.[2]

Adaptation refers to two different processes: changing the original English text to render it more signable and to eliminate such things as long, discoursive passages that cannot be translated visually; and altering or introducing situations, characters or physical devices in order to make a production more visual or to render it in *deaf theatre* style. These three terms will be used, as defined here, in the body of the paper.

SIGN LANGUAGE AS A THEATRICAL MEDIUM

To understand the attraction of sign language as a theatrical medium, it is necessary to briefly examine its history, structure, and function in the everyday lives of deaf persons. In doing so, we will confine our discussion to American Sign Language (which has been recognized by linguists as being a distinctive, living language in its own right)[3] and to the various related systems which may influence theatrical styles.

Systematic sign language was first introduced in the United States in 1817, having been brought from France by Laurent Clerc, a deaf Frenchman recruited by Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet to help him

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[2]Bernard Bragg, "Ameslish--Our American Heritage: A Testimony," *American Annals of the Deaf*, 118, No. 6 (1973), 672-74.

[3]Two major centers for research in this area are Gallaudet College and the Salk Institute for Biological Studies in La Jolla, California. Publications on the subject are available from both sources.

establish the first school for the deaf in this country.[4] Records of the time show that this sign system, initiated in the eighteenth century by a French priest, l'Abbe de l'Epee, from his observations of communicacion among deaf persons, and further developed by his successor, l'Abbe Sicard, was remarkably complex. The sign for "faith," for example, required a series of actions indicating the absence of any kind of physical or intellectual evidence for a belief "held in the heart." In addition to several hundred signs similarly representing concepts, the French system included a manual alphabet, consisting of hand configurations corresponding to the individual letters of the written alphabet, which are used to "fingerspell" specific words for which there are no separate concept signs.[5]

In its American setting, the French sign language was refined and simplified, and gradually altered by various events and circumstances. From the mid-nineteenth century until very recently, the use of sign language in the education of deaf children was largely in disfavor. Some educators and parents blamed sign language for the deaf child's inability to learn "correct" English, and for preventing the deaf person's full integration with the general public. As a result, in many schools sign language went "underground" and children communicated by private systems supplemented with whatever they picked

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[4]Gallaudet was a clergyman sent by a group of concerned philanthropists to obtain information on European methods of teaching the deaf. His school was founded in Hartford, Connecticut.

[5]The study and creation of manual alphabets (dactylology) was a popular pastime among eighteenth-century scientists and philosophers.

up from encounters with deaf adults. The standard-bearers of traditional sign language usage had been the graduates of Gallaudet College in Washington, D.C., which for more than a century was the world's only institute of higher education for deaf persons. In spite of their influence, local and individual variations proliferated, became acceptable and commonplace, and added to or altered the language. As the standardizing influence of Gallaudet College diminished, and the "dialect" variations increased, sign-language usage became less precise, sometimes ambiguous, and occasionally incomprehensible to an out-of-town signer. The lack of formal sign-language training was offset, however, by a greater freedom to improvise and to create spur-of-the-moment visual descriptions. The coming of motion pictures, particularly the intensely visual techniques of the early silent films, exerted yet another influence on sign-language structure and usage by providing visual models of actions and events.[6] These and other changes resulted in the language now known as Ameslan.

Ameslan, like other languages, is based partly on physical reproduction of observed phenomena, and partly on arbitrarily determined symbols. In English, for example, the word "moo" is onomatopoeic, a vocal reproduction of the sound made by a cow. In Ameslan, the sign for "cow" is a physical reproduction of a cow's horns. Interestingly, and quite naturally, there is no specific sign for the

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[6]Some of the innovations resulting from film techniques are discussed by Miles in "A History of Theatre Activities in the Deaf Community of the United States," unpublished thesis, Connecticut College, 1974, p. 14.

concept "moo." Many Ameslan signs (such as *bird, house, jump, forget*) follow this physical principle, and can be easily recognized and accepted by a person unfamiliar with the language. This is one of the elements that makes sign language attractive and fascinating to theatre audiences. Many other signs, such as those for *sin, skill, intent,* and *fun*, may have had physical origins which are now lost and forgotten.[7] Their meanings cannot be recognized by a nonsigner; thus they are purely symbolic.

The major differences between Ameslan and English are in syntax and in those extra-linguistic signals that affect the functioning of the language. Ameslan syntax follows certain visual and temporal principles that have not been fully determined, but that are immediately apparent when they are violated by unskilled users of the language. One of these principles is related to the precedence of certain visual symbols. For example, the English sentence "I rowed the boat" would be translated in Ameslan as "Boat, me row," since the boat must be established before a person can row it. Among the extra-linguistic signals that are vital to the functioning of Ameslan are facial expression and repetition of signs. The sentence "I have been typing this paper all day" becomes "Paper this (a pointing motion), me type-type all-day," accompanied by a facial expression that indicates whether I enjoyed the task or was exhausted by it. Other signals include movements

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[7] An illustration of a known change from physical representation to symbolic sign is seen in the signs currently in common use for "father" and "mother," which are corruptions of the sign phrases "man-holding-a-baby" and "woman-holding-a-baby." This tendency to modify away from physical or visual origins may have interesting implications relating to the origins of spoken languages.

and posture of the head, shoulders, and torso, and the speed, vigor, placement, and directionality of signs. In the phrase given above, the feeling of exhaustion could be conveyed additionally by bending the head and shoulders and slowing down the signs "type--type--type all--day"; while pride and satisfaction would be indicated by a lifted head, straight shoulders, and a speeding up of the signs. Gesture and pantomime are also important components of Ameslan, since the fluent user describes persons, objects, or events by acting them out. Given a language in which all of these qualities are inherent, it is easy to see why the fluent user of Ameslan is a natural performer.[8]

Not all deaf persons use sign language, and of those who do, not all use Ameslan on a regular basis, if at all. Individuals who in childhood received a strictly oral training (that is, who were forbidden by teachers and parents to sign either in or out of the classroom on the grounds that it would impair their learning of speech and lipreading) may in adulthood prefer to use a system more closely resembling spoken English. This is true also of many persons who are hard-of-hearing or those who lose their hearing after having acquired spoken language. In addition, since English is the language of the dominant hearing culture in which deaf Americans live, it is considered desirable that they be exposed to this language in the classroom, at all levels from elementary school through college. Thus many deaf

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[8]For a more detailed analysis of Ameslan, see the various papers appearing in the series, *Sign Language Studies*, published by Mouton Publishers, The Hague, The Netherlands.

persons, from constant exposure to English, have incorporated English words and some of its syntax with Ameslan to make Ameslish. But these individuals can, when called upon, provide examples of "pure" Ameslan. The more English-oriented a deaf person is, the more he will make use of fingerspelling (and of lip movement) to convey precise verbal, as opposed to visual, meanings.

A number of sign systems exist to serve as transliterating media from spoken to visual English. The earliest system used for this purpose is one that has been called Manual English ("Sign English" at Gallaudet College). It is a system which retains the Ameslan concept/sign relationship (where the sign is related to its conceptual reproduction rather than to an English word) but which follows the syntax of the spoken language and fills in the blanks with fingerspelling. To illustrate, the suggested phrase "I have been typing this paper all day" might be transliterated in Manual English as "Me finish b-e-e-n type that paper all-day." *Finish* is an Ameslan concept sign denoting completed activity, and is used in Manual English to indicate the auxiliary verb "have"; *been* (if included) is fingerspelled. Manual English omits word endings as in typ-*ing*, since this is included in the *finish* concept; *that* replaces "this," since Ameslan merely points to indicate *this*; *paper* and *all-day* (the latter being conveyed by a single sign) follow Ameslan usage. Thus Manual English is only an approximate visual representation of English, and clues for the precise English terms used must be obtained through lipreading. Dissatisfaction with Manual English as a teaching medium led in recent years to the development of more precise systems that make use of new and initialized

signs, replace the Ameslan concept/sign relationship with a fixed word/sign relationship, and provide signs for prefixes, suffixes, articles and so on.[9] These systems are at present used mainly in the classroom. Signed English, however, is a variant in wider use that retains some of the Ameslan concept/sign relationships but uses initialized signs and word endings. The given sentence in Signed English and the new systems alike would be rendered as: "I (initialized sign) have (word/sign relationship in Ameslan denoting possession) be-en (initialized sign for "be" + word ending "-en") typ-ing (word ending "-ing") this (new sign) paper all (word/sign relationship, in Ameslan denoting complete collection) day."

From a theatrical point of view, the disadvantage of these various transliterating systems is that they separate the sign language to a greater or lesser extent from its *extra-linguistic signals*. In the hands of a skilled signer fluent in both English and Ameslan, this may not be so. He will retain the appropriate facial expressions, body movements, tempo, and other elements that contribute to the dramatic effect. He can also, where necessary, use lip movements that provide clues to the words he is transliterating. A deaf person to whom English is an imperfectly learned second language, however, may appear stilted and unnatural when required to memorize lines in Manual English, because he is thrown off rhythm and may be forced to abandon

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[9]Among these systems are initialized signs, SEE (Signing Essential English), SEE II (Signing Exact English), and LOVE (Linguistics of Visual English). Most of the systems in use are described in Vol. 5, No. 2 (1974-75) of *Gallaudet Today*, which comprises a group of articles on this topic.

some or all of his *extra-linguistic signals*. Furthermore, if precise English speech skills have also eluded him, this person's lip movements may bear only slight resemblance to the shape of English words, *though they continue to give vital clues to other deaf persons*. On the other hand, when an English-oriented person (whether deaf or hearing) attempts to perform in Ameslan without either innate skill or proper training, he may seem equally awkward and uncomfortable. What is worse, the result can be completely incomprehensible to viewers, both those who depend on Ameslan and those who are accustomed to Manual English. In sum, the farther removed a sign system is from Ameslan, the less rich it is in dramatic elements, and the farther removed an actor is from his normal mode of communication (whether this is Ameslan, English, or something between the two) the less convincing and intelligible he will be on stage, without intensive training. It should be noted, however, that some signers are able to shift comfortably from one system to another, sometimes throughout the whole range.

Use of the technique known as sign-mime requires similar control. In skilled hands (the pun is unavoidable), this technique can be startlingly effective.[10] When it is misused, however, it becomes

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[10]Sign-mime may be described as the mimetic extension of a sign, or series of signs, to produce vivid images in space. For example, the base sign for "tree" is made by resting the elbow of one arm, with the forearm upright and the fingers spread out, on the back of the opposite hand. The upright hand is jiggled slightly to represent the movement of a tree. If this movement is made more rapid, or if the hand curls or drops or the whole forearm begins to sway, we see a tree under different conditions of wind or weather. Having established the tree, we can also remove the base hand and use it to chop the tree down. These are some of the actions that can be described as sign-mime. Deaf persons use this technique spontaneously in everyday conversation. On stage, of course, the dramatic effect is heightened by the control and precision of the delivery.

meaningless. There can be an overemphasis on artistry at the expense of clarity among both skilled and beginning signers. In the former case, it is at least fascinating to watch; in the latter case, no amount of extension or careful visual arrangement will render meaning to poorly chosen or poorly executed base signs.

Because of its convenience as a translating medium and its retention of many of the dramatic components of Ameslan, Manual English is the medium predominantly employed by *sign-language theatre*. In fact, many productions which claim to be presented in Ameslan are actually using a form closer to Manual English. Unfortunately, confusion exists between the components of Manual English and those of Ameslan. As we have seen, Ameslan is able to dispense almost entirely with fingerspelling, which is in any case difficult to read from a distance and offers limited scope for creative innovation. Sign-language productions in Manual English strive to eliminate fingerspelling for artistic reasons, but thereby render the medium less effective for transliteration and produce garbled results by attempting to fill in the omitted words with invented signs or inappropriate concept signs. In addition, directors who are unaware of the function of lip movement in Manual English usually insist that their actors keep their mouths closed, to avoid distracting attention from the signs. This deprives deaf audiences of another aid to understanding, and serves also to restrict facial expression, thus defeating its own purpose by distracting attention from the signs. Properly used, and heightened where necessary by sign-mime (as in the rendering of songs and poetry, and in descriptive passages), Manual English

can be a valid dramatic medium for *sign-language theatre*. In *deaf theatre*, it can be used appropriately by characters who might normally be expected to communicate that way.

In the final analysis, the choice of medium (or system) for any production or part of a production of either *deaf* or *sign-language theatre* depends upon the same criteria that apply to the selection of material: the audience for which it is intended, the abilities of the people concerned, and the material used. These three criteria are discussed at length on pages 23-39.

THE PRODUCTION

SCENE ONE: THE RECENT PAST

Sign-language theatre, at the amateur level, is by no means a new form of theatrical activity. It has a long and distinguished history in the deaf community of the United States and in other countries throughout the world.[11] Deaf persons, excluded by the nature of their disability from full participation in the cultural activities of the larger society, set up local or, occasionally, touring companies to provide entertainment in a language that their audiences could understand and appreciate. This was particularly true at Gallaudet College, where the theatrical tradition stretches back as far as records go--to the 1880s. Nor is the *concept* of *deaf theatre* a new one, since various groups and individuals have experimented with the possibilities over the years, without, however, recognizing its distinctive style until very recently. One striking fact emerges from the records: although a small number of deaf persons created original material for amateur presentation prior to the 1970s, only one of them (Eric Malzkhun, now a teacher at the Model Secondary School for the Deaf in Washington, D.C.) is known to have attempted a realistic portrayal of a deaf person's life, and this play was never produced. In other words, deaf playwrights tended to develop material appropriate for *sign-language theatre* rather than for *deaf theatre*.

Possibly this was a form of escapism. To many deaf persons, the lives of people with normal hearing seem infinitely more dramatic

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[11] This history has been chronicled at length by Miles, op.cit.

and exciting than their own, and this impression is reinforced by the attitudes of those around them. From childhood on, the deaf person is under constant pressure from parents, educators, and others to achieve standards that are based on "hearing" values, such as competency in spoken English and the ability to understand and be understood without recourse to sign language. This may create in him a sense of personal rejection and the view that to be hearing is the ideal. One myth common to deaf persons is that a hearing person can do *anything*. Small wonder, then, if the deaf actor gains immense satisfaction from living a hearing life on stage, and that the deaf playwright of the past catered to this satisfaction.

It has been left to hearing artists to capture and convey some sense of the fascination and drama inherent in the lives of the deaf persons. However, the characters they create are developed from observation rather than first-hand knowledge, and are usually portrayed by hearing actors who are similarly restricted; hence they do not seem real to the majority of deaf persons. Deafness in most productions has been presented as a tragedy, or at least as a serious problem, and the problem is usually not "How can the deaf person deal with this situation?" but "How can we deal with the deaf person?" This passivity is noticeable even in the few cases where deaf characters are central figures, such as Elmer Harris' play *Johnny Belinda*, and the film of Carson McCuller's novel *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*. The only major production in which it is possible to see the emergence of an active personality is one based on real life: *The Miracle Worker*, William Gibson's gripping drama of the childhood of deaf-blind Helen Keller.

This latter play reached the Broadway scene in 1959, which for the future of *deaf theatre* was an opportune time. The American government had in the preceding decade concerned itself increasingly with programs for the rehabilitation of its handicapped minorities, and a growing number of persons new to the field of deafness were becoming involved in such programs. Consequently, the ability to communicate with adult deaf persons by means of sign language was a skill suddenly in demand. Enrollment in sign-language classes went up. Deaf persons found themselves courted and catered to in an unprecedented way. Activities at Gallaudet College received wider publicity. And William Gibson's play, for which Anne Bancroft and Patty Duke learned fingerspelling, brought theatre professionals into contact with the deaf world and showed them the existence and potential of *sign-language theatre*.

As a result, the theatregoing public was introduced to this unique medium in 1967, with the founding of a professional touring company known as the National Theatre of the Deaf (NTD). The company was sponsored by the Eugene O'Neill Memorial Theatre Center from its home base in Waterford, Connecticut, and was funded by the then Vocational Rehabilitation Administration.[12] Theatre managers and their patrons were at first naive ("Did you say 'theatre of the *death*'?"), then skeptical, but it soon became evident that the productions had

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[12]For a description of the events leading to the founding of the NTD, and the persons involved, see Miles, pp. 50-65.

audience appeal. Before long, the public realized that this was not an attempt to win sympathy for the handicapped, but a lively, vigorous, exciting medium presented by attractive and talented individuals, capable of holding its own and even excelling in competition with other forms of theatre. From that point on, the NTD, its offshoot company, the Little Theatre of the Deaf, which performs for children, and its actors have been in steady demand.

The NTD offered its first four annual productions in *sign-language theatre* style. In 1971, with its original offering of *My Third Eye*, it gave a foretaste of what *deaf theatre* could become. This production was developed by the actors themselves working under five different directors (including Broadway's Joe Layton) and writer-artist-choreographer Remy Charlip), and was based directly on their own experiences and points of view. It was greeted with particular acclaim by the deaf community, which had not been as enthusiastic as were hearing audiences about the previous productions. For its next three productions, the NTD returned to the style of *sign-language theatre*, but continued to create original material and to develop a range of brilliant visual techniques that are equally applicable to *deaf theatre*, and with its 1975 offering, *Parade*, the company has again based its production on a theme taken from the deaf experience.

The first two examples of full-length plays in *deaf theatre* style were, however, developed outside of the NTD, though both originated with and were directed by former actors with the company. The plays, both comedies, were initially produced in 1973. First to be

staged was *Sign Me Alice,* by Gilbert Eastman, Chairman of the Department of Drama at Gallaudet College, where it was offered as a major presentation in April, 1973, with a cast of students. The second, *A Play of Our Own,* was developed by Dorothy S. Miles with an amateur dramatic company, the Hartford Thespians. It was first performed in May, 1973, and was presented in a number of east coast cities at intervals during the year. Both plays have been repeated in other communities,[13] and the typical response has been that of Taras Denis in *The Deaf American:*

> [*A Play of Our Own*], like its forerunner, "*Sign Me, Alice,*" . . . is the kind that the deaf community can truly identify with; the kind that we need more of and the kind that I'm sure will inspire yet others.[14]

While neither play offers profound insight or character analysis, or aims at innovative stage techniques, each is important in terms of its contribution towards this new approach.

SCENE TWO: WORK IN PROGRESS

The NTD is a touring company; thus its appearance in any one community is a rarity, a once- or twice-a-year event at most. In its eight years of existence it has created a wide audience for *sign-language theatre* among the general public which, with the deaf community,

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[13]*Sign Me Alice* has since been performed by the Chicago Deaf Theatre, with Bernard Bragg of the NTD in the leading male role. *A Play of Our Own* has also been recreated by a company composed of students and local residents in the area of California State University, Northridge, under the sponsorship of the Center on Deafness, and has been performed in several towns and cities of Southern California. See *The Deaf American,* 26, No. 3 (1973), 9-10, for a write-up on *Sign Me Alice;* and the same magazine, 26, No. 4 (1973), 14-15, for articles dealing with *A Play of Our Own.*

[14]Taras B. Denis, "Front Row Center," *The Deaf American,* 26, No. 4 (1973), 14.

looks for more frequent sources of entertainment. This audience demand, as well as the eagerness of actors, directors, and finally a few potential playwrights, for *sign-language* and/or *deaf theatre* has resulted in an increasing number of local programs being set up, particularly in or near colleges and universities that have in recent years established services for hearing-impaired students. It is mainly to the directors and sponsors of such programs that this paper is offered, in the hope that the background information and production techniques given will assist their work. The hoped-for end result will be that local communities are provided with more and better exposure to a wide variety of dramatic entertainment, in both *deaf* and *sign-language theatre* styles.

What are the various production elements that require special consideration in a visually oriented theatre style? They can be grouped for convenience under three main headings: selection of material, use of narrators, and technical effects.

Selection of Material

The distinction between *sign-language theatre* and *deaf theatre* is clearest in terms of source of material. *Sign-language theatre* draws from existing literature intended for spoken presentation; hence it has a wide range of plays, stories, and poems from which to choose. *Deaf theatre* aims primarily at the development of original material. Certain existing plays or stories may lend themselves to adaptation to this style by reason of themes that reflect the deaf experience, and in doing so may offer new insights. For example, the NTD piece "Sideshow" in *My Third Eye*, which pokes fun at the foibles of the hearing

world, was partly inspired by the satire of Lemuel Gulliver's adventures in the lands of Lilliput and Brobdingnag, from Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*.[15] It is recognized, however, that few existing plays could be performed in *deaf theatre* style without drastic alteration. If Hamlet were a deaf person, he would require a totally different play. Thus it may be expected that the creations of *deaf theatre* will come increasingly from biographical material, personal experience, and group improvisation. In particular, it is foreseeable that the poetry of *deaf theatre* will take its initial inspiration from the visual patterns and elements of sign language, rather than from vocal sources in translation.

Nevertheless, the same standards of theatrical excellence apply to *sign-language* and *deaf theatre* productions as to spoken theatre, and the director should take the same care in selecting his material. Vera Mowry Roberts, in *The Nature of Theatre*, offers three specific factors that should influence a director in his choice. These are, in the order listed by Roberts: the intrinsic merit of the material itself, the capabilities of the theatre group with whom the director is working, and the kind of audience that will attend the

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[15]Similarly, *Sign Me Alice* took its basic premise of a professor undertaking the education of a young woman from Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, while the theme of *A Play of Our Own*--an encounter between families of different cultural background--was inspired by the film, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*.

eventual production.[16] For the purposes of this paper, these three factors will be reviewed in reverse order.

Audience. A consideration of the nature of one's audience is crucial to any theatrical production. Roberts stresses that "The first obligation of a director in choosing a play for performance is to *know*, as intimately and exactly as he can, the audience for whom it is intended."[17] Harold Clurman, in his book *On Directing*, devotes a whole chapter to the subject, expressing his conviction that "Theatre is a particular mode of expression *through which a community realizes itself*. The audience is the theatre's well-spring, *its leading actor*"[18] (italics ours). Productions that are intended for general audiences cannot always hope to please specific groups and interests, but both the above writers imply that a continued poor audience response to productions suggests that the director needs to reevaluate his objectives.

The confusion of objectives that has occurred in recent years is hardly surprising. Throughout most of its long history, *sign-language*

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[16]Vera Mowry Roberts, *The Nature of Theatre* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 316. The author adds: "It is inexcusable that a responsible director choose a play solely on the basis of its challenge to his own abilities: to do so is insufferably selfish. The play cannot be realized in performance except through the devotion and hard work of a great many people besides himself; their interests and potentialities must be taken into account. And it is the height of foolishness to deliberately antagonize an ongoing audience by a particular choice of play, since any standing theatre company will shortly cease to exist if it does so."

[17]Ibid., p. 317.

[18]Harold Clurman, *On Directing* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), p. 155.

theatre was performed solely on an amateur basis, using all-deaf casts and playing primarily to all-deaf audiences. Because deaf talent was largely untrained, and deaf persons in general had little contact with mainstream theatrical trends and techniques, *sign-language theatre* on the whole (and particularly outside of Gallaudet College) was limited in scope and range. However, it met the needs and tastes of its unsophisticated audiences, which were composed mainly of noncollege adults educated at residential schools for the deaf across the nation. Today, the audience for *sign-language theatre* (or what may be called the *sign-language theatre* community) is no longer homogeneous. It includes persons with a wide variety of backgrounds, ranging from "grassroots" deaf adults to PhDs: children from residential schools and those attending special local programs and public high schools; persons deaf from birth or early childhood and those deafened in adulthood; persons with profound hearing losses and those who can hear normally with an aid. In addition, it includes a large proportion of hearing persons, both adults and children, many of whom have had no previous contact with deafness or sign language.

The tendency in recent years has been to give increasing attention to the interests of the hearing segment of the audience, for social as well as artistic reasons. The medium of theatre is ideal for achieving the following social purposes:

1. Increasing public acceptance of sign language and support of programs that use it by demonstrating its beauty, versatility, and creative aspects.

2. Upgrading the public image of deaf persons by presenting skilled and attractive deaf performers before the public.
3. Instilling pride and self-confidence in deaf users of Ameslan (or other sign systems) by allowing them to see it being received with general acclaim.

Producers of *sign-language theatre* who wish to achieve the above objectives must naturally attract hearing persons to their productions, and ensure that they understand and enjoy what goes on. Hence current material has been selected predominantly on the basis of popular taste (as can be seen by the proliferation of musical productions in sign language), or on the basis of classical prominence. Such material, accompanied by voice-over narration, effectively demonstrates how sign language enhances the spoken word.

In striving for the above very worthwhile objectives, however, producers of *sign-language theatre* have frequently overlooked the interests of deaf persons and neglected certain artistic values. A production may easily become more of a showcase for sign language than a vehicle for genuine emotional self-expression, especially if the actors do not fully understand the language used, or must rush through it to synchronize with a speaker. Musicals may, ironically, offer more scope to skilled hearing signers than to deaf actors and will not automatically appeal to persons who have never experienced sound. Consequently, deaf audiences have of recent years seen *sign-language theatre* taken up by hearing enthusiasts, while they themselves have lost much of their former interest and involvement in community theatre. It has frequently been asserted that increased

exposure to a variety of theatrical styles will eventually create a more sophisticated audience among deaf persons, but this exposure must begin with material that attracts them back to the theatre, entertains and intrigues them, and encourages them to ask for more.

This is where *deaf theatre* comes in. *Deaf theatre* should be aimed first and foremost at the deaf theatre community, that is, at those deaf and hearing persons who know sign language and are in constant association with each other, with the belief that anything which is honest and valid for this group will eventually prove appealing to theatre audiences at large. Taking its material from real or imaginary issues that confront deaf persons, it should attempt to link these issues to the universal experience, or, conversely, it can adapt carefully selected and relevant material directly to the deaf experience. By offering theatre with which the deaf person can identify, it should provide the potencial writer or director with models for further creation, and looks to a future when the deaf artist creates material for world theatre from his own life, rather than attempting to mold his life to the world. Thus the cardinal rule for *deaf theatre*, and one that could usefully be shared by *sign-language theatre*, is that *productions should be relevant and fully comprehensible to deaf audiences*. Only when this is achieved should playwrights and directors in this medium turn to the problem of conveying information to the nonsigners in the audience. Very possibly this shift in priorities will result in better theatre, through techniques that add to the artistry of the whole and provide mixed audiences with genuine and rewarding shared experiences.

Capabilities of group. The first person to come under consideration in assessing the capabilities of a group should be the director himself. This is a sensitive area, and one where objective evaluation is difficult, but it must be put to scrutiny if the standards of *deaf* and *sign-language theatre* are to improve and remain consistently high. Ideally, a person chosen to direct a group performing at either the amateur or the professional level in the above styles would have the following qualities:

1. Familiarity with the deaf community and its culture, and with the types of deaf and hearing people who make up the *deaf theatre* and the *sign-language theatre* communities. This implies, of course, a familiarity with deaf and hearing actors and an ability to appraise their potentialities and limitations.
2. Training in theatre arts, whether this is formal academic or workshop training, practical experience with a good theatre group, or a combination of both. This training should have touched on all the major elements of a production and resulted in the person's ability to see these elements as part of an organized structural whole.
3. Vision and imagination, which enable the director to perceive the central concept, or "spine," of his material and to develop and present this concept as faithfully as possible before the audience. This clear artistic image unifying the whole production is necessary whether one starts with a written play, a collection of pieces, or an original idea to be developed through improvisation.

4. Mastery of both the English language and of Ameslan, or whatever sign system or systems will be used in the production. This is especially crucial for *sign-language theatre*, where on the one hand material must be read and understood in English before it can be translated, and on the other hand audience comprehension of unfamiliar material depends on a clear, vivid, and accurate translation into Ameslan.

If a director possessing all four of the above qualities can be considered ideal, then the number of such ideal directors in the United States is strictly limited. The scarcity of fully qualified individuals points up the need for training programs which will remedy the deficiency, particularly in relation to deaf persons, who cannot hope to make a living in professional theatre (outside of the NTD), or even to create acceptable amateur theatre with their own language from their own lives, without vastly improved preparation.

In the meantime, we must settle for less than the ideal. Deaf directors, usually more knowledgeable about the theatre community they serve and more skilled in Ameslan than their hearing counterparts, need to be realistic about their possible limitations in theatre techniques, and in their grasp both of overall concept and of line-by-line meanings when the material must be translated from English. Hearing persons drawn to this type of theatre, who may have more adequate artistic and technical training and certainly a more comfortable command of English, can usefully take on a codirector or a sign-language coach in order to make the most effective use of Ameslan, and they must be willing to accept feedback from deaf persons to determine the impact

of a production upon the theatre community concerned. For both deaf and hearing directors, an honest self-appraisal will prevent the selection of material beyond their actual capabilities.

Assuming, however, that the director of a group is fully capable, he must then appraise his actors to determine what material they can handle. The crucial nature of a person's communication skills in his work with this visual medium has already been discussed. His acting skills are equally crucial. Unsophisticated audiences (both hearing and deaf) may tend to overlook acting flaws by assuming that these are "natural" to sign language presentations, and hearing persons may be totally unaware of drastic errors made in sign language usage. Directors who rely on this lack of sophistication in the audience to present inferior work deserve reproof. As *sign-language* and *deaf theatre* gain status, it will become increasingly important that both performers and performances represent the highest quality available. Anything else will mislead the public and do disservice to the art.

Hence the director of an inexperienced group would be wise not to give the actors more than they can manage. A group of beginning signers, for example, might logically limit themselves to simple material that does not include sustained or complicated passages of signing; the same might be true of a predominantly deaf cast of inexperienced actors. The director may take the existence of varying degrees of skill within a group into consideration while casting, so that the degree of skill becomes an appropriate trait of the character portrayed. For example, a character who is shy and awkward could suitably be played by a person skilled in acting but not in signing.

In *deaf theatre*, such an actor might be cast in a nonsigning role. Similarly, a signer who makes generous use of the space around him might be cast as a loud-voiced character, and so on. It is not meant to imply that all sign-language actors should be typecast, merely that the director can make artistic use of his beginning actors' strengths and limitations.

An important consideration in the selection of *sign-language theatre* material for a specific group is the problem of translation. A director fluent in both Ameslan and English may prefer to do the work himself prior to a production, or he may have the services of a skilled translator. Either case permits the use of more complex material than if novice translators are involved. A third possibility is for the cast to translate the play as a group effort during the early part of the rehearsal period. Again the length and complexity of the material may be limited by the skills of the group. In the NTD, such group translations add to the sense of ensemble achievement, as well as resulting in a richer and more varied text. With a less experienced cast, the translating of difficult texts such as Greek drama may be too time- and energy-consuming for profitable results. If the translating experience is considered desirable for such a group, the material chosen should be relatively short and straightforward, and the director or codirector should be prepared to clarify English idioms, classical or topical allusions, slang, and so forth for the actors, as well as providing sign-language equivalents where necessary.

Whichever translating method is used, the actors should of course be encouraged to experiment with their lines, and to adjust the

signs until they are comfortable with them, as long as the result retains the meaning and is in keeping with the character portrayed. Productions that call for a stylized translation may require a coach to work with the actors. A Restoration comedy, for example, would need a more formal signing style from all the actors than they use in daily communication. Similarly, actors playing different characters might require coaching in different signing styles or systems, although this can also be dealt with by careful casting. A person normally using "platform style" Ameslan, or Manual English, might appropriately be cast as Justice Wargrave in a sign-language version of Agatha Christie's *Ten Little Indians*, but the same actor, with coaching, could portray Harry the Horse in *Guys and Dolls*. A good director will approach the translation process with these considerations in mind, and remain flexible without sacrificing artistic control.

Hearing actors who wish to become involved in *sign-language theatre* need training in the medium. Fortunately, their needs are being met by an increasing number of programs such as that at California State University, Northridge (CSUN), originally designed for the training of teachers and interpreters, and now expanding in scope. Deaf persons with acting potential likewise need training in their art. They are currently being offered a limited number of programs, mainly at the college level. As has been pointed out, there is a vital need for improved training and exposure for deaf persons of all ages, in schools and communities, in all areas of theatre. Ideally, each big city would have such a training program attached to a community theatre so that amateur experimental groups could be continually

working on new productions in *sign-language* and *deaf theatre* styles. In this way, a resident director could become familiar with, and learn to make best use of the capabilities of a relatively permanent group, which would by this arrangement have an outlet for its completed work.

Merit of material. From the foregoing sections, it may be deduced that the merit of a play in terms of spoken theatre does not assure its suitability for *sign-language theatre* presentation. Nor do precisely the same standards apply to both *deaf* and *sign-language theatre* when material is chosen for adaptation. *Deaf theatre* looks for plots that suggest the deaf experience, such as that of *Alice in Wonderland*, where the heroine is never quite sure what is going on, or why. The need to offer a believable portrayal of deaf characters precludes the selection of better known classical and modern plays. For *sign-language theatre*, two factors demand consideration: whether the material can be translated into effective and comprehensible Ameslan, and whether the action of the play can be carried forward visually rather than through dialogue. Shakespeare is difficult to translate and must often be paraphrased vocally to allow for compression into signed images, but the loss in spoken poetry may be compensated for by the gain in insight offered by an expert visual translation of ambiguous passages. The amount of physical action in Shakespeare's plays also makes them more adaptable than the offerings of such modern playwrights as Eugene O'Neill, T. S. Eliot, and Samuel Beckett. In plays by these authors, the dialogue is vital to the development (or sometimes nondevelopment) of the plot, and this dialogue is usually highly

intellectual and metaphorical. Thus not only is translation difficult, but also the long passages of dialogue seem to call for a relatively static staging, which is visually uninteresting. Sophisticated comedies such as those of Noel Coward and Neil Simon may likewise be unsuitable if they rely on verbal humor, puns, or topical allusions to make their point, since these are lost in translation. Plays that depend heavily on some sound-based technical device, such as the telephone, are definitely unlikely.

As for *deaf theatre*, the merit of its material must be judged leniently until the style is well established. It is probable that most of the early original material will be in the form of short plays, and as Dr. George Savage, who taught playwriting at UCLA, has said:

> If administrators of a program for original short plays waited until good ones appeared, they would seldom do any. You must do inferior plays to get better scripts. You must do the better to find the very good. In fact, almost all original plays will be improved by production. The good version will be the rewrite after production; perhaps after several tryouts.[19]

An important ingredient in the development of playwriting and directorial skills is access to honest, informed criticism. As Savage adds:

> Criticism of the manuscript play should be an unavoidable obligation of everyone concerned with the production. . . . Analysis is not an opportunity to blow off steam, to perpetuate personal feuds, to attract attention. A properly motivated critical atmosphere may be constructive.[20]

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[19]George Savage, "An Approach to the Teaching of Playwriting," in *The Best Short Plays of 1957-1958*, ed. Margaret Mayorga (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), p. 295.

[20]Ibid.

But the plays must be developed before they can be analyzed and criticized, and this development will probably take place in an accepting atmosphere away from commercial pressures.

The merit of material selected or created for *deaf* and *sign-language theatre*, then, should lie in its genuineness, not only in terms of content but also of concept and treatment. A director who is honest with himself, and who works to ensure that his actors are equally honest with their material, can feel confident that his work has merit, regardless of how little known the material may be. This honesty should extend to the audience, so that while the productions do not merely cater to popular demand or expectation, neither are they so far removed from this demand as to alienate a large segment of the audience. When this kind of artistic honesty has been generally achieved, both cohesion and selection of material should come more easily.

Use of Narrators

Narrators, who may also be referred to as readers or speaking actors, are necessary for *sign-language theatre* whenever a sizeable number of hearing persons are expected in the audience. Prior to the founding of the NTD, the standard practice was to have one or two narrators, usually seated at the front of the auditorium, speaking the lines as the actors signed them. This method is still in use today, but has certain disadvantages. Unless the readers are themselves skilled actors, they may be unable to modulate their voices sufficiently to indicate which actor is speaking or what emotion he is feeling, and the result may be not only confusing but also monotonous. In

addition, the distance between the actors and their "voices" detracts from the dramatic impact.

The single most important innovation introduced by the NTD was the use of onstage narrators. This changed the face of *sign-language theatre* in several ways: it enabled the narration to be dramatically integrated with the sign-language presentation, since the narrators were themselves actors with trained and versatile voices to fit the various characters they spoke for; it encouraged hearing actors to become involved in this type of theatre and made sign language an attractive and exciting thing for young actors to learn;[21] and it established the style securely with the hearing theatregoing public. This public, reassured by the normalcy of what seemed to be a whole cast of different voices coming from the stage, gradually accepted and then became fascinated by the signs that accompanied the spoken words.

For *sign-language theatre*, onstage narrators can be integrated into a production with originality and ingenuity, in diverse ways that add to the effectiveness of the production as a whole. A common device is to cast speaking actors in minor roles as attendants, soldiers, bystanders, and so forth. The NTD used its readers in a Moliere play as gaily costumed street cleaners. In a recent production of

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[21]Paradoxically, it was this development that made true *deaf theatre* possible, since deaf actors cannot realistically portray hearing characters except in nonspeaking roles, and thus cannot furnish any distinction between a deaf and a hearing character on stage. With hearing actors present, it is possible for deaf persons to "be themselves."

The Bacchae at CSUN (directed by theatre major William Collins, himself deaf, as part of his graduate requirements), the Chorus was composed mainly of speaking actors, who doubled in other minor roles. At the same location, a production of Eugene Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano*, under the direction of Darlene Allen, used narrators as pieces of furniture, a portrait, statues, a mummy, and a bear-skin rug. These narrators-as-props not only spoke but also moved around, thus adding a further striking innovation to complement the absurdity of the play. Narrators who are themselves skilled signers may be given major roles, while continuing to speak for other characters (*viz.* Louie Fant's portrayal of blind Captain Cat in the NTD version of *Under Milk Wood*).

Synchronization of speech with signed lines takes place during the rehearsal process, where the narrator memorizes his lines and at the same time adjusts his pace to that of the signer. Since the intention in most cases is to provide voice-over narration dovetailed to the signed lines, the text may require some juggling. In situations where the signed version needs less time than the spoken lines, the narrator will be forced to speak too fast or continue too long after the signer has finished, unless the English text is cut or the signed translation is expanded. Conversely, if a short spoken line requires much signing, the narrator's words may need to be padded out to an appropriate length.

Deaf theatre is only now beginning to explore ways of making its productions intelligible to the general public without sacrificing its artistic principles. Among the ways that this can be accomplished is by paring down the dialogue until the production is closer to being

mime, as was done in *The Wall*, an original piece by the actors of the National Technical Institute for the Deaf in Rochester, New York. This will be effective for some productions, but *deaf theatre* is, and should remain, a language theatre. Hence *deaf theatre* too needs its speaking actors to provide a form of narration, while they are at the same time portraying hearing characters. One possibility is to make realistic use of actors as interpreters. For instance, in a play set in a courtroom, a hearing actor in the role of an interpreter would interpret anything signed by a deaf actor into spoken English, and anything spoken by a hearing, nonsigning actor into signs, as a normal part of his role. Another device would be to arrange the dialogue so that the audience is clued in by spoken responses to signed lines, and vice versa (e.g., signed line: "[You] reject me? [I] can't imagine that." Spoken response: "You never thought I would reject you? Well, now you know.") In surrealistic plays, the voices can be deliberately repetitive and come from anywhere in the theatre. These and other techniques need further exploration.

Technical Devices

The intent of the various technical effects and devices used in *deaf* and *sign-language theatre* is identical with that of hearing theatre: that is, they aim to give unity to a production, and to underscore salient events in the performance. The difference is one of emphasis: productions in sign language call for technical effects that emphasize visuality.

Settings. One of the main concerns of a director of sign-language productions is that the stage set should enhance the visibility of the signing. This implies a simple background, with an avoidance of colors or patterns that could produce eyestrain. Both Gallaudet College and the NTD have demonstrated the effectiveness of draped or cycloramic backdrops set off by a few simple ramps and platforms. Such platforms serve a dual purpose: they break up the stage area for visual interest, and they provide differing stage levels from which the signing actors can be visible to the audience. An early NTD production, *Songs from Milk Wood*, made effective use not only of platforms but also of a stepladder, several ramps, chairs, stools, and a number of solid wooden posts. Besides providing differing levels, these items contributed to the impression of the Welsh fishing village that was the locale for the play. The modern trend of performing on a bare stage with a minimum of props, and of allowing the actors themselves to suggest scene changes, can be both economical and effective for sign-language productions when performed in a theatre with a sloping auditorium; in other houses, where the audience is seated on one level, steps and platforms are crucial to proper visibility. It should be added that there is no objection to an elaborate set, if it is in keeping with the style of the production and does not distract from the signing.

Blocking. As the signing actor moves around on the stage, his signs must remain visible to the audience and to some or all of his fellow actors. Consequently, blocking in *deaf* and *sign-language theatre* needs careful attention. Unlike the speaking actor, the

signer cannot turn his back on the audience except for special effect. In that case, he may need to use enlarged signs, or to sign either to the right or left of his body, or above his head (prayers, for example, can be done effectively this way). Furthermore, an actor cannot turn so that he presents his profile to the audience while he is signing, for then those seated on one side of the auditorium lose sight of his upstage hand, unless he is standing at the far side of the stage and facing towards center. As a rule, the signing actor is discouraged from turning more than one-quarter turn away from the full-front view, particularly at center stage.

Another evident visual requirement is that downstage actors do not obstruct the audience's view of an actor signing upstage. One simple solution to this problem would be to bring each actor downstage when it is his turn to speak. This can be effective when the actor has a long speech, but for quick exchange of dialogue it becomes ludicrous, and attempts to maintain visibility can result in a solid semicircle of actors crowded into the downstage area. A more imaginative approach is to arrange the actors into small groups and, if necessary, have the downstage actors sit or kneel. As in spoken theatre, the entire cast can contribute to directing focus by giving full attention to the signer (or, where appropriate, by deliberately ignoring him) and by avoiding distracting movements. The director needs to be alert for too many abrupt changes of focus that might result in a tennis-match effect for actors and audience alike. It should be remembered that deaf members of the audience need time, and

a clear signal, if they are not to miss any of the dialogue during a major shift in focus.

Carefully thought-out blocking, in any theatre production, requires repetitious and time-consuming rehearsal, but makes all the difference in the final result. Nervous actors have a tendency to move around the stage without purpose, in ways that do not integrate with the text, and in sign-language productions this can be particularly distracting. In such productions, too, it should be apparent that a move is not made simply to gain visibility for a signer. Directors must urge their actors to find logical and artistic reasons for clearing themselves visually and taking the focus on stage.

Costumes and Props. Well-designed costumes are important for any theatre production. For sign-language productions they can be a crucial part of the communication process. As with settings, costumes can serve to enhance the visibility of the signs, and to this end, design details (particularly sleeves) should be regulated so that they do not interfere with free signing. Designs that offer simple lines and one-color tops are most effective. Some directors feel that they should avoid bright costume colors, but this is not necessary if the colors provide a contrast to the face and hands, and are in harmony with each other and the set. For several seasons the Little Theatre of the Deaf was effectively costumed with tight-fitting suits in bold shades of red, blue, green, and yellow, with contrasting touches.

For special effects, a director may want costumes and props that *do* make signing difficult, such as sleeves that continually cover an actor's hands, or a hand-held prop that can be passed from one signer

to another during their dialogue. Gloves can be used in various ways. For one of the NTD's first productions, *Gianni Schicchi*, the actors wore white gloves as part of their stylized costumes, which also included whiteface make-up. In a CSUN production of *The Doctor in Spite of Himself*, directed by Darryl Allen, the effect of garbled speech was achieved by having an actress wear mittens. A miraculous cure occurred when the "doctor" removed the mittens. Ways of avoiding hand-held props can also provide humor. In Moliere's *Sganarelle*, the cowardly "hero" enters at one point with an armload of different weapons. For the NTD production, Bernard Bragg in the title role had the weapons strapped around his waist and hanging from his wrists. This allowed the designer to strike a symbolic note by placing a nightstick so that it dangled limply between the hero's legs.

Because of the importance of facial expression, the designer needs to give close attention to the area around the face. Hairstyles, wigs, hats, and collars should be arranged to frame the face and leave it clearly visible, except where disguise is intentional. Make-up that distorts the eyes and mouth may prove more distracting than artistic, while masks of any kind (which rob the signing actor of one of his major assets, a mobile face) are best used sparingly, to contrast with and thus emphasize facial mobility. By keeping in mind the primary aim of visuality, and the specific components of sign language that can be highlighted or subdued, costume designers can give a production its best touches of originality.

Lighting. Theatre lighting is used to create mood and atmosphere, as well as to make the actors visible on stage. In sign-language productions, visibility should be the first concern. Dim

lighting creates eyestrain for deaf audiences and may completely ruin their enjoyment of a production,[22] while total darkness, except between the scenes, is obviously impossible. Lighting colors, especially for spotlights, should be chosen to give a high degree of light transmission. Certain shades of straw and amber tend to turn skin pigments yellow, and may wash out the actors' hands and face and make their signs unreadable.

With these restrictions in mind, lighting a sign-language production can be an enjoyable artistic challenge. Lights can be used to cue entrances, exits, and dialogue, to provide focus, and to create special effects. The occasional use of background lighting that places the actor and his signs in silhouette is one possible technique. There is much room for experiment in the use of lighting to replace sound effects, such as music. For example, a number of devices have been invented by which pressure on a piano-type keyboard results in a flood of different colors on a screen. In the CSUN production of *The Bacchae*, an attempt was made to produce this effect on a larger scale by using changing patterns of vivid colors on a cyclorama, with fascinating results. This is another area in which a good designer can make an impressive and original contribution.

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[22]Hearing persons, who can allow their eyes to wander during a presentation, may not realize how tiring it is on the muscles of the eye when a person has to maintain a constant focus on the stage. Dim lighting blurs the edges of the signs, and adds to the strain, particularly since actors tend to speed up the pace of their signing on stage.

Sound Effects. Few productions in either *deaf* or *sign-language theatre* style are performed entirely without sound. Hearing members of the audience need the stimulation provided by music, or by background noises such as thunder. Some sign-language productions are heavily dependent on sound, particularly translations of musicals, but it should be recognized that these ultimately appeal mainly to hearing or hard-of-hearing persons. Since deaf persons are sensitive to vibrations, the use of a bass drum to provide rhythm or to punctuate important passages might be considered for certain productions. A good rule of thumb to follow in the use of sound is that if it leaves deaf actors totally dependent upon hearing persons for cues or rhythms, or if it shuts deaf members of the audience off from a large part of the total experience, then it is excessive.

Visual Media. Comparatively little use has been made in sign-language productions of various visual devices such as films, filmstrips, and slides, although these are very effective when used. The 1960 production of *Ten Little Indians* at Gallaudet College substituted a film of a person signing in place of the original phonograph record that lists the crimes of which the ten different characters are accused. In this way, both actors and audience received the information visually. In the NTD production, *My Third Eye*, during the "biography" segment, slides of childhood photographs were flashed on the backdrop while actors told personal stories. For a recent CSUN production of *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*, slides relating to the *Peanuts* comic strip were prepared and shown as a

prelude to the performance. The possibilities for using visuals are endless, and need to be explored as the work in progress continues.

SCENE THREE: A GLIMPSE INTO THE FUTURE

Roberts has pointed out that theatre "has long been one of the most effective of the arts in aiding man to understand himself and his world, in reflecting, refining, and ordering that world."[23] This is a skill that deaf persons, particularly those who are unable to achieve a precise command of written or spoken language, are very much in need of. Given exposure to a sufficient number of plays that directly touch his life and imagination, the deaf person should gain in many ways, not the least of which is becoming more articulate about himself, his needs, and his identity, both in relation to his deafness and as a complete human being.

To repeat Harold Clurman's words: "Theatre is a particular mode of expression through which a community realizes itself." If, in the past, theatre in the deaf community has been mainly imitative and unsophisticated, this implies that deaf persons have been encouraged to live imitative lives. Now that sign language is achieving respectability, and deaf persons are no longer under the same pressure to conform to the majority group, it is natural that they are turning to a more original mode of theatre for self-expression.

As the curtain rises on the future, this is the glimpse we have: of *deaf theatre* which enables members of the deaf community to

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[23]Roberts, p. 477.

identify themselves and to express this identity in original ways that will relate to universal themes, and of *sign-language theatre* that will supplement rather than replace this experience. We see an increased and freer use of Ameslan for dramatic purposes, and at the same time a greater variety of communication styles to suit the talents and skills of the persons involved. We see more and better training for artists in both theatre styles, and an increasing number of deaf persons involved in theatre at the professional level. And we see a growing public awareness and acceptance of deafness not as a problem but as an experience that can add new insights to the human condition.

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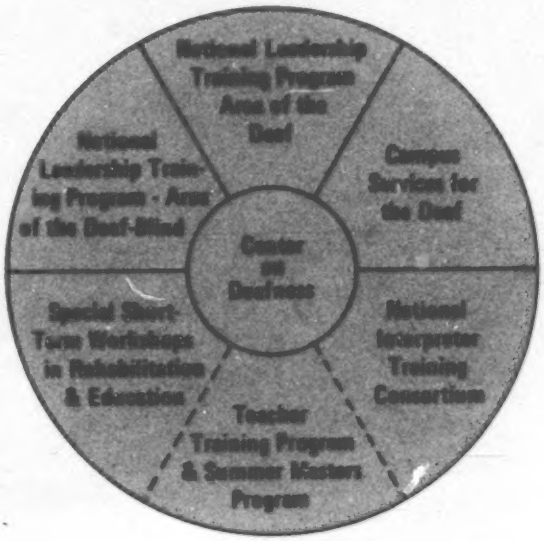
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